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# Racial Influences on the Perception of Police

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## INTRODUCTION

Global perception of police is how someone perceives the police in general. Race has consistently been a factor that predicts perception of police, with minorities having a less positive perception of police (Vogel, 2011; Wu, 2014). Viral videos of police officers who have killed unarmed African American males have incited national debate about racialized police violence and brutality. This additional spotlight and discussion surrounding police may alter college student's perception of police. The current study examines the influence of global perception of police and race on perception of police in ambiguous situations using violence on unarmed suspects.

The following hypotheses were tested:

1. Participants will view a White police officer's actions as more justified than an African American police officer's actions.
2. There will be a positive correlation between global perception and perception of police in the vignettes.
3. Participants will report the civilian's race as African American.
4. Minorities will have the most negative perception of police officers.

## METHODS

### Participants

- 144 undergraduate students consented
- 122 data analyzed due to attrition ( $n = 8$ ) and missing the manipulation check ( $n = 14$ ).
- Male ( $n = 27$ ), Female ( $n = 94$ ), Other ( $n = 1$ )
- White (54.1%), Non-White (45.9%)

### Procedure

Undergraduate students were recruited to participate in an anonymous online questionnaire for potential extra credit. Informed consent was obtained online prior to participating in the study. Mild deception was utilized, in that participants were not informed that race would be an analysis factor. Participants were randomly assigned to the White ( $n = 68$ ) or African American ( $n = 54$ ) police officer instructions. Participants read 5 randomized vignettes (1 justified, 1 unjustified, 3 ambiguous) of violent police officer encounters with individuals and answered questions about the officer and individual's behavior ( $\alpha = .792$ ). Participants then answered the global perception of police questionnaire ( $\alpha = .925$ ) to access their perception of police in general. Next, participants answered demographic questions. Last, participants were given an online debriefing form disclosing the purpose of the study. Participants were then asked if they would like to submit their data or have their data remove from the study.

## RESULTS

**Hypothesis 1:** An independent samples  $t$ -test was performed to examine the differences between the White and the African American police officer actions in the vignettes ( $M = 37.76$ ,  $SD = 8.54$ ;  $M = 38.24$ ,  $SD = 8.06$ ). No significant difference was found,  $t(120, 2) = -.31$ ,  $p = .76$ . This indicates there were no significant differences in perception of the police officers due to the police officer's race. Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

**Hypothesis 2:** A bivariate correlation examined the relationship between the perception of police in the vignette and global perception. The results show there was a small, but significant, correlation between the participant's global perception of police and their perception of the police within the vignettes provided,  $r = .29$ ,  $n = 122$ ,  $p = .001$ . Hypothesis 2 was supported.

**Hypothesis 3:** Participants reported their perception of the civilian's race within each vignette. Participants' responses of "likely" and "very likely" were grouped together as an indicator of perceived race, and then an overall perception was calculated based on frequency throughout the vignettes. Participants identified the individual as African American (32.38%) most frequently. Next, individuals were identified as Hispanic/Latino (26.35%), White (24.08%), Asian (8.77%), and then Native American (8.42%). Hypothesis 3 was supported.

**Hypothesis 4:** An independent sample  $t$ -test was performed to examine differences of global perception of police between those who identified as White and Non-White. The results show a significant difference between the White and Non-White participants' global perception of police,  $t(120, 2) = 5.38$ ,  $p < .01$ . The results show White participants had a more positive global perception of police ( $M = 47.70$ ,  $SD = 8.17$ ) than the Non-White participants ( $M = 39.23$ ,  $SD = 9.20$ ). Hypothesis 4 was supported.

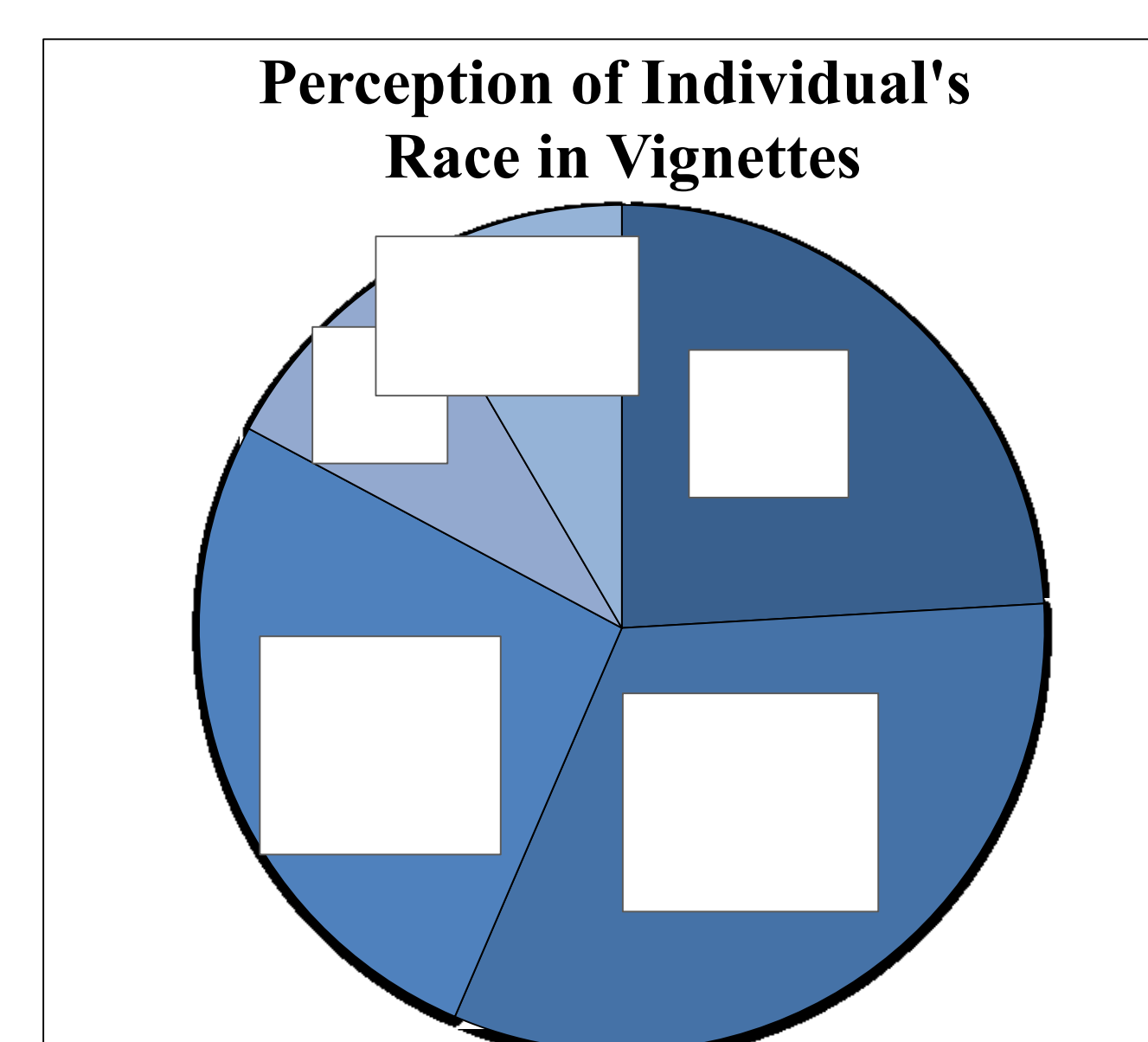


Figure 1: Participants' perceived the individual in the vignettes to be African American more than other races.

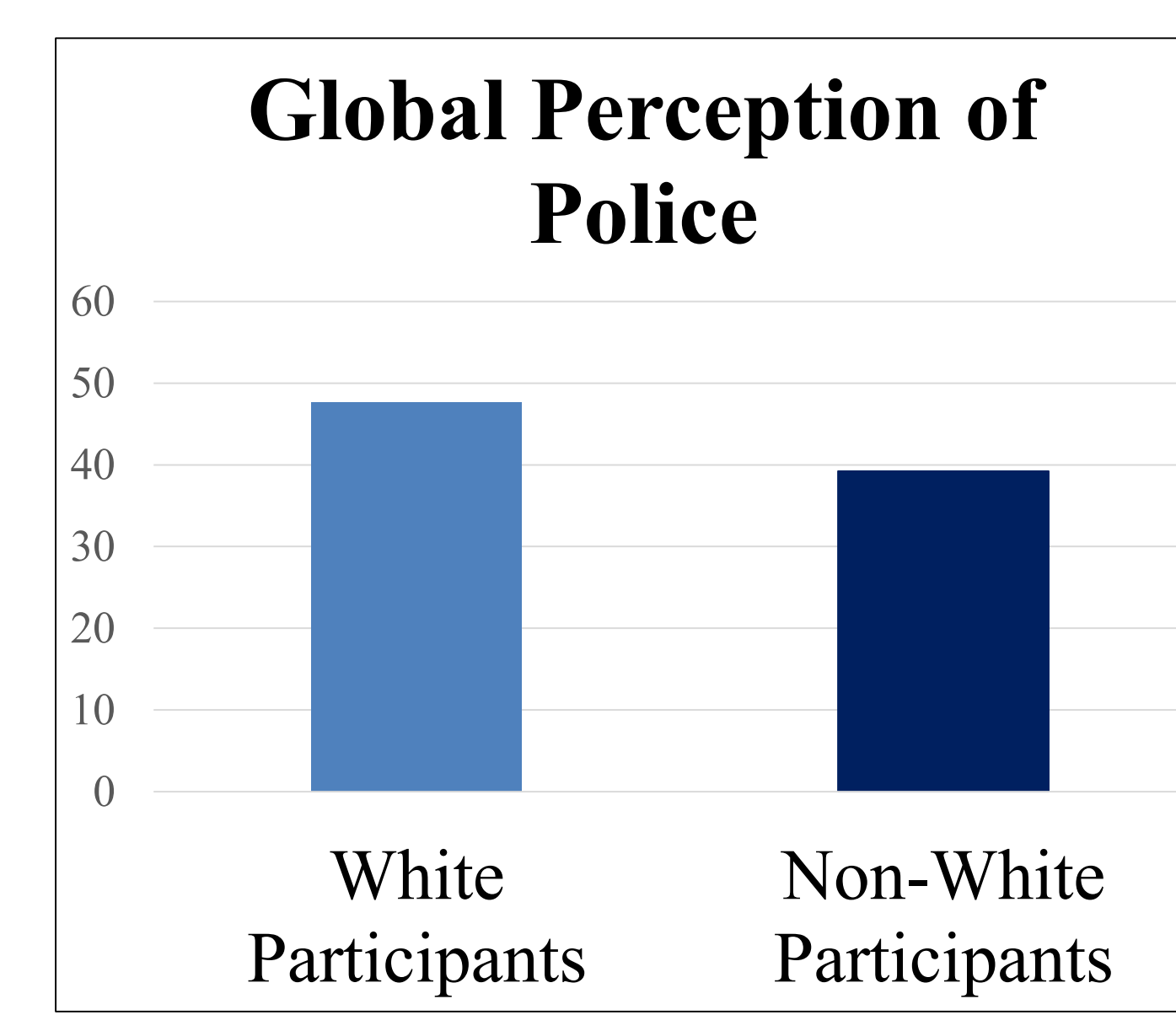


Figure 2: Minorities had a statistically significant lower global perception of police than White participants.

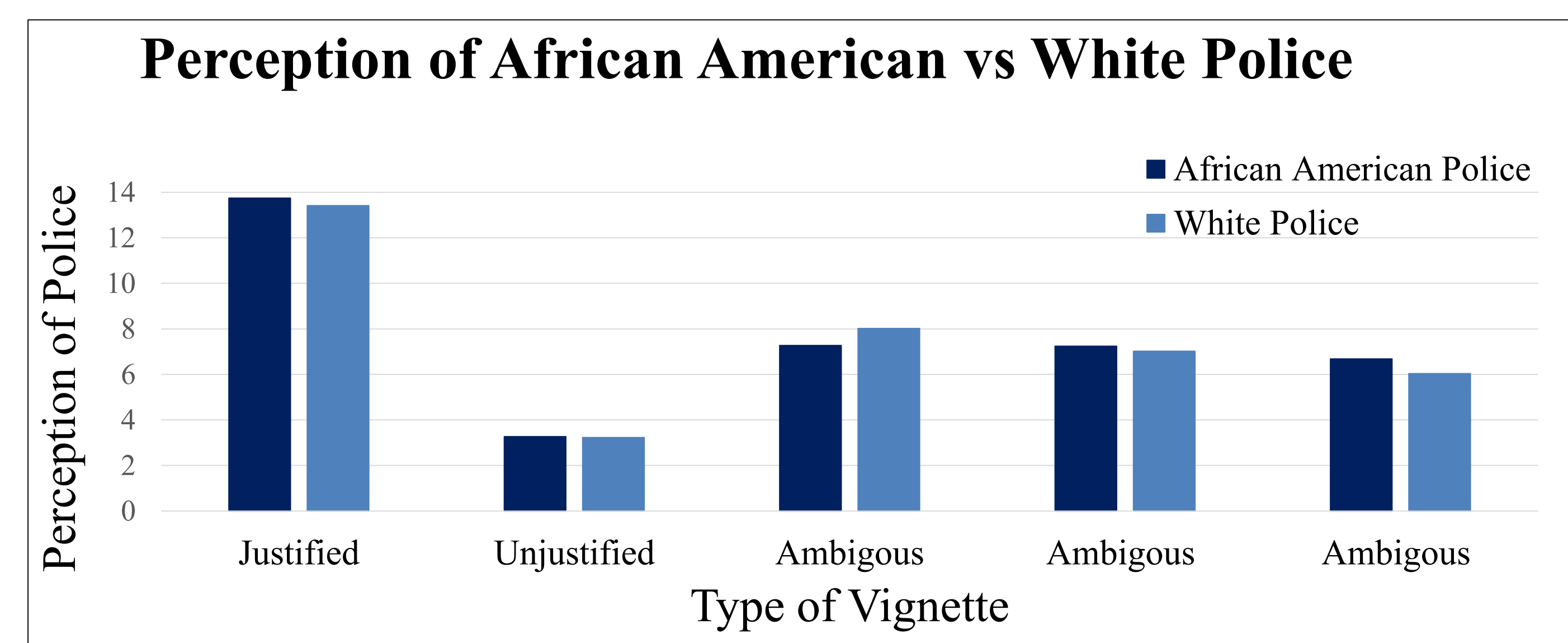


Figure 3: The race of the police officer in all vignettes did not significantly impact the perception of police.

## DISCUSSION

The results indicate the race of the police officer in the vignette did not significantly impact the perception of police. This indicates that the perception of police is consistent, despite differences in the race of the police officer.

The perception of police officers in the vignettes was positively correlated with the global perception of police. This implies that participant's perception of police generally stay consistent throughout different scenarios.

Participants view an individual involved in a police encounter as being African American more than other races, consistent with previously literature (Mekawi & Bresin, 2015).

Participants generally had a positive view of police. However, those who identify as a minority do not perceive police as positive as those who identify as White. This finding is also consistent with previous literature (Vogel, 2011; Wu, 2014).

A limitation of the study includes that the sample was collected from a college population at Augusta University in the city of Augusta, Georgia. Additionally, the measures used did not have reliability or validity established prior to collecting data.

Future research could gather a more diverse sample that is representative of the population. More races could be included for the identification of the police officer, rather than just White and African American.

A possible implication of the results may be to attempt to improve the police citizen relationship in areas that are heavily populated with minorities, as they hold less positive views of the police.

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